

Iraqi resistance shatters US propaganda of "liberation" war

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25 March 2003

The battles which erupted Sunday and Monday in southern and central Iraq have exploded Bush administration claims that the invasion of Iraq would lead to a speedy collapse of the Iraqi government. Instead of US and British troops being hailed as liberators, they have encountered fierce resistance in towns such as Umm Qasr, Nasiriya and Karbala.

The first encounter between US forces and the Republican Guard, the best-trained and best-equipped Iraqi military units, took place Monday morning near the city of Karbala in central Iraq, about 60 miles south of Baghdad. The 32 Apache helicopters of the 11th Attack Helicopter Regiment, US Army V Corps, attacked an armored brigade of 90 tanks.

The helicopters received what CNN correspondent Karl Penhaul called a “heavy, heavy barrage” of anti-aircraft fire, which shot down two of the helicopters and forced the others to withdraw. Penhaul described the pilots as “somewhat dazed, somewhat stunned” by the level of Iraqi resistance. One pilot called the attack zone “a hornet’s nest” in which Iraqi fire came from “all sides.”

The attack force was compelled to abandon its mission and every single helicopter received some damage, mainly from small arms fire, with as many as 15 or 20 bullet holes in each machine. Iraqi state television later broadcast film of one of the helicopters on the ground, with armed Iraqi soldiers dancing around it in jubilation.

Sunday saw the bloodiest battle of the five-day war, with hundreds of Iraqi soldiers and militiamen attacking Marines in Nasiriya, a city 230 miles southeast of Baghdad and 100 miles from the Iraq-Kuwait border. As many as two dozen US soldiers were killed and over 50 wounded, the largest US combat losses in a single day since the Vietnam War. Press reports cited claims by US soldiers that some civilians had taken up arms to join in the fighting, ambushing the Marines as they sought to enter the city.

US and British forces faced a counterattack by Iraqi soldiers in Umm Qasr, the southernmost town in Iraq and its only Persian Gulf port. The port itself was seized in the first two days’ fighting, but Iraqi forces hid in the town and reemerged Sunday. Despite huge superiority in firepower—the US and British forces have unrestricted control of the air, as well as artillery, tanks and naval gunfire—they were unable to dislodge Iraqi soldiers armed only with rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars.

The first days of the war have also seen a series of misfires and malfunctions in the high-tech US arsenal. US bombs and missiles have landed on the territory of Iran and Turkey, destroyed at least one British warplane, and came close to hitting an American naval vessel in the Persian Gulf. While there is no question that the US military has a huge technological advantage over the Iraqi forces, these incidents undermine the claims of US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld about the unprecedented precision of American bomb and missile attacks.

The aerial bombardment of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities continues unabated since it began Friday night. Iraqi officials have provided few details of the resulting casualties, releasing figures for the death toll which appear to be deliberately minimized, perhaps to avoid panicking the population. The sheer tonnage of bombs being dropped is staggering—roughly the equivalent of a Hiroshima atomic bomb in the first four days.

There is a growing danger that having failed to subdue Iraq with the first wave of attacks, the Bush administration will escalate to saturation bombing, with the potential of leveling Iraqi cities and killing tens if not hundreds of thousands. The dispatch of B-52 bombers from their bases in Great Britain—the deadliest weapon of the Vietnam War—suggests that attacks of even greater brutality will soon be under way.

The first week of the war has refuted many of the

complacent predictions of the Bush administration and its US media apologists. There has been no collapse of the Iraqi regime. There has been no mass surrender of Iraqi troops, even among the regular army soldiers who were thought to be less reliable than the Republican Guard troops. There have been no scenes of mass rejoicing at the prospect of US-British military rule replacing the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. There have been no reports of chemical and biological weapons, either used in battle or discovered by US and British troops. There have been no Scud missiles fired, either at the invading forces or at Israel. And there has been no systematic attempt to sabotage or destroy the oilfields, either in southern or northern Iraq.

The heroism and determination of the outgunned Iraqi soldiers has surprised not only the US military command, but the regime of Saddam Hussein as well. The Iraqi high command appeared to have written off the southern half of the country in the initial days of the fighting, pulling back forces to concentrate on the defense of Baghdad. The resistance of the Iraqis in the south is a manifestation of spontaneous popular opposition to the US-British invasion.

The unexpected ferocity of the Iraqi resistance has already produced some second-guessing of the Bush administration's military strategy in the US press. The *Washington Post*, in a front-page analysis Monday, wrote: "Pentagon officials had expected U.S. troops to be greeted almost universally as liberators, at least in the Shiite south. That view influenced a war strategy based in part on the goal of achieving victory by persuading the Iraqi population and military that Hussein's government is doomed."

American forces have pressed on rapidly towards Baghdad, bypassing most other cities and their garrisons. The *Post* continued: "U.S. commanders knew going into Iraq that they were executing a plan that contained a good deal of risk. It flings the U.S. invasion force deep into Iraq at the end of a long, largely unprotected supply line." The events in Nasiriya suggest that, if the war does not end rapidly, the US forces approaching Baghdad could be exposed to counterattacks or supply problems.

There are also indications of mounting concern on the part of the Bush administration that the prospect of a protracted war which causes significant American casualties could undermine both military morale and public support at home.

One disturbing incident, from the standpoint of the Pentagon, was the first case of Vietnam-style "fragging,"

as an American soldier apparently rolled grenades into three headquarters tents for the 101st Airborne Brigade, killing one officer and wounding at least a dozen others. Press reports indicated that political opposition to the war may have played a role in the attack: Sergeant Asan Akbar, who was arrested near the scene, is a black American who converted to Islam. He reportedly denounced the war as MPs led him away, shouting, "You guys are coming into our countries and you're going to rape our women and kill our children."

Even more significant was the reaction of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld Sunday to the capture near Nasiriya of the first American POWs, five soldiers in a support unit. After Iraqi television showed film of the five being questioned by their captors, Rumsfeld denounced the broadcast as a violation of the Geneva Convention.

Rumsfeld's outrage is highly selective, since at his direction the Pentagon shredded the Geneva Convention when it comes to Taliban soldiers captured on the battlefield in Afghanistan. Hundreds of Taliban POWs were murdered by the US-backed Northern Alliance, with the approval of their American CIA and Special Forces "advisers." Hundreds more have been denied POW status and shipped to the Guantanamo Bay prison camp—itsself a violation of the Geneva Convention, which bars removing POWs from the country where they are captured.

Moreover, the US media has freely filmed and photographed Iraqi prisoners captured since the ground war began March 21, as part of the propaganda campaign to convince American public opinion that the war will be over within a matter of days. The front page of the *Washington Post* on Sunday—the day of Rumsfeld's complaint—featured a color photograph of an Iraqi prisoner being led away blindfolded.

Rumsfeld's outburst was an expression of concern that once the reality of a bloody war hits home, the paper-thin public support for the invasion of Iraq—largely generated by the systematic lying on the part of the Bush administration and the media—will give way to redoubled opposition and popular anger.



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